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ABSTRACT

This booklet, revised from the March 1990 version, provides suggestions for reassessing, modifying, and arranging child care center environments to best serve the needs of children and staff. The booklet notes that a well-planned environment can provide young children with appropriate and challenging learning experiences within a consistent and secure setting. Such an environment also allows staff to become involved in meaningful, intimate interactions with children by reducing the time required for organizing and reorganizing furniture, rooms, and equipment. The booklet recommends that the ideal center include distinct areas for: (1) active physical play; (2) manipulative play; (3) messy and creative play; (4) kitchen or dramatic play; (5) quiet play, music, an storytelling; (6) personal storage; (7) curiosity and sensory activities; (8) outside world or real life experiences; (9) seclusion; (10) eating; (11) diaper changing and toilets; (12) sleep; and (13) dressing and undressing. Sample floor plans are provided. Contains 22 references. (AA)

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Planning appropriate learning environments for children under three

Linda Harrison

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Planning appropriate learning environments for children under three

For very young children, an 'identifiable space' must include familiar places and patterns

About the Author:

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Introduction

When you think of running a child care centre, do you take 'running' literally?

When sitting down with a toddler to read a story or play a game, do you begin to feel guilty or uncomfortable, thinking you should be doing something else?

Do you jump up to help every time another staff member begins to clean up equipment, or set up for meals or sleeptime?

Do you find you think more about what you have to do next, rather than what teaching you could be doing now?

If the answer to any of these questions is 'yes', then read on. This resource book is designed to reassure you that the role, and the right, of child care staff working with infants and toddlers is to be relaxed, to be able to sit and talk with young children, to interact and to teach at all possible opportunities. The suggestions provided for reassessing, modifying and arranging the child care environment should help staff to do just that.

The essence of quality care

When the first edition of this resource book was written in 1989, the Australian early childhood field had just entered into the debate on the question of quality care — what did it mean, how could it be defined, how was it to be achieved? Now we have clearly moved beyond the questions, and have wholeheartedly taken up the challenge to ensure that quality care is the right of all children. Australia leads the world in becoming the first country to develop a government-initiated and supported national childcare quality improvement system. The National Childcare Accreditation Council (1993), as with National Association for the Education of Young Children's (1987) voluntary Accreditation schedule in the United States, the Australian Early Childhood Association's (1987) Quality in Long Day Care survey, and Harms, Cryer and Clifford's (1986) Infant-Toddler Environment Rating Scale, provides an overview of the components and criteria for achieving quality care. These documents are are the starting point for understanding the essence of what is meant by quality care.

There is another approach, however, to our understanding of, and advocacy for, quality care — the personal approach. Lilian Katz (1989), in speaking about what we look for in quality child care, brought the debate to the level of the individual response and asked: 'Would you place your child in this centre?' While this question applies to all children and all centres, it seems especially pertinent when we consider placing our babies and toddlers in child care. In thinking about the answers to this question, our intuitive tendency is to look first and foremost to the quality of the caregivers. Will the staff nurture, support, direct, extend, and love our children as much as we do? Will they tell us about our child? Will they help us cope with the loss of those

hours of daily separation? And will they support us as parents and our child's primary caregivers? From the personal perspective, quality care is about the attributes that we seek in the caregiver, and in his or her interaction with children and parents.

Support for the personal approach to quality care is plentiful. Jim Greenman (1988) tells us that 'the most important ingredient in good care for babies is the child's caregiver' (p.2). Pam Schurch (1988) writes: 'loved adults are the key to what under-threes learn and how they respond to experiences' (p.29). The relationship between young children and their caregiver(s) as the key to quality care is also underlined in the work of Greenblat and Ochiltree (1993), who found that 'trust' was one of the most important reasons given by mothers' for their choice of a caregiver. Similarly, Teresa Hutchins (1995) states that 'one of the most important influences in the development of very young children is the quality of the attachment relationships with their caregivers' (p.3) and argues that for this reason programs for infants and toddlers must be very different from programs for older children.

It is clear that caregiver–child interaction is basic to the provision of quality care, but what must also be considered is that the quality of this interaction depends on the extent to which the caregiver can devote his or her time to being with the children. It depends on the time available for positive interaction. Janet Gonzalez-Mena (1979) argues that much of a child's time with the caregiver should aim to be 'quality time'. Quality time, she writes, is when 'each person is fully present with the other, giving full attention, responding. Giving of one's time in this way is giving of one's self.' (p.53). In other words, quality care is dependent on planning a program which ensures that staff and children spend a great deal of quality time together.

Quality care = quality time

The issue that must be addressed in our aim to achieve quality child care is how are we to plan for and provide quality time in child care? How can we allow caregivers to be individually attuned to the children, to slow down to the pace of an emergent walker or to converse with a child just beginning to talk? How can we enable caregivers to provide emotional support for the child and family at separation time, and to build trust in the relationship? How can we ensure that quality time occurs regularly and consistently throughout the day?

Jim Greenman (1988) gives us an answer in his *First Paradox of Infant Toddler Programs*. His assertion is that while the caregiver is the most important ingredient of good child care, it is the

Positive interaction between caregiver and child is the key to good quality child care

environment that is more likely to distinguish between high and low quality child care programs (p.53).

A well planned environment can offer two essential contributions to quality care. First, it can provide children with appropriate and challenging learning experiences within a consistent and secure setting. Second, it allows staff greater opportunity to become involved in meaningful, intimate interactions with children by reducing the time required for organising and reorganising the furniture, the room and the equipment.

These two areas, appropriate learning experiences for children birth to three, and effective organisation of equipment and space, will form the basis for the information provided in this resource book. A third section will bring these two facets of quality care together by describing and illustrating how a group of child care staff achieved an effective, high quality environment for toddlers.

Appropriate learning experiences for children under three

Any attempt to provide quality learning experiences for children under three must begin from the starting point of the child. There are now a number of excellent publications which have contributed to our understanding of infants and toddlers, and how to plan appropriate programs and environments for this age group. Each of these works presents a slightly different perspective on the child under three: some describe the unique needs of the developing 0- to 3-year-old and how environments can best meet these needs (Lally 1990; Sebastian 1988; Kellet 1984; Cataldo 1981); others have defined a philosophy of caregiving with identified age-specific objectives for under-threes (Hutchins 1995; Schurch 1988; Gonzalez-Mena & Eyer 1980); and a third approach has been to look at the characteristics of infant and toddler play, and design learning environments around these recognisable behaviours (Patterson 1988; Sponseller 1974).

All of these approaches emphasise that the under-threes have unique characteristics, behave in particular ways, and have specialised needs. It is also clear from these writings that the one distinct quality or developmental task of these years is the child's establishment of a sense of self.

The primary developmental task for 0-3s is the establishment of a sense of self.

Child care providers must recognise this essential nature of the under-threes and design learning environments which facilitate the achievement of this goal. What children in care must experience in developing a sense of self are **consistency** (which provides them with security, an understandable world, recognisable and maintained limits, and develops trust, confidence and self-control), and **challenge** (through which they assert their independence, develop autonomy, and move into an extended social and cognitive world). The notion of these opposites — **consistency and challenge** — encapsulates the delicate balance that marks children's progression through infancy to toddlerhood. The environment must not only recognise and provide for these two opposite needs in the developing personality, but must be flexible enough to respond to the varying emphases of each side of the balance within the individual child.

Consistency: The 'built-in' curriculum

Consistency, in child care for under-threes, is often directed at the need for a stable, reliable caregiver or group of caregivers with whom the child can form secure relationships. However, consistency is also required in the physical environment where, as the term 'implies an identifiable space whose parameters are regular, dependable and comfortable' (Dimond 1979, p.27).

For very young children, an 'identifiable space' must include familiar places and patterns known to the child in the home.

Elizabeth Dimond (1979) argues that the child care environment should not be 'something wildly different' from the everyday quality of a home setting (p.8). It should have the same comfort, interest, security, familiarity, and intrigue. It should have the same open spaces and hideaway places, the same changes in floor surfaces, the same sort of furniture to hang on to, crawl into, and climb on. Comfortable furniture, such as couches or lounge chairs, also allow adults to more easily hold children, and provide the physical contact and comfort that is so important for infants and toddlers.

The 'consistent' environment should also be carefully designed to ensure childrens' safety, and as such, should not require the constant eye of an adult. As at home, there should be times when children are left to their own devices, to be watchful, to explore freely, and to make choices for themselves. Magda Gerber (1979) emphasises the importance of allowing infants to freely explore in a safe environment. 'Spontaneous, self-initiated activities ... have an essential value for physical and mental development, in that the pleasure evolving from exploration and mastery is self-reinforcing' (p.40).

A child derives security from an environment which is regular, predictable and constant.

Attachment theory, as developed by John Bowlby, has taught us that children will explore most freely when they feel secure. While security is most often associated with the presence of a reliable, sensitive caregiver, Magda Gerber (1979) has argued that young children also 'derive security from permanency, constancy and anticipation', ... qualities which can be 'provided through the careful organisation of space and time' (p.39). In child care settings, this constancy can be achieved by having defined areas where certain activities and certain types of play always occur. Active play areas should be clearly separated from quiet areas, table activities from floor play, climbing and gross motor areas from dramatic play settings. As much as possible, these areas should be permanent, allowing the child to learn through familiarity and repetition where to go for jumping, or for storytime, or for block building.

A young child learns from an environment which is dependable, reliable, and has a clear sense of order.

A consistent environment is one which dependable, reliable and has a clear sense of order. This is reinforced by effective child–caregiver interactions. Staff must determine achievable expectations and set clear limits, based on realistic expectations and a thorough knowledge of infant-toddler behaviour. These expectations or 'rules' must be maintained by regular explanation, and taught to children through both verbal and non-verbal means. For example, the expectation that books must stay in the quiet area is best maintained by physically taking the child to return a book while saying 'This is where the books belong'. **Doing it** is a more effective

learning experience for the child than having staff pick the book up and return it to the book area after it's been left somewhere. Children learn the 'rules' and the structure of the centre through repeated explanation and practice and these are best reinforced by the establishment of a regular, ordered environment. Children should also be invited to help maintain this order, and to understand it. Putting away toys is a major part of the child care day, and staff should try to slow down the process to give enough time for children to become involved. This can be helped by storing equipment in clearly labelled containers which identify where items are to be packed away. In this way children learn that careful replacement is as meaningful as selecting and using the equipment or materials.

An environment which is comfortable for young children is one which recognises their needs and their unique, sensory way of learning.

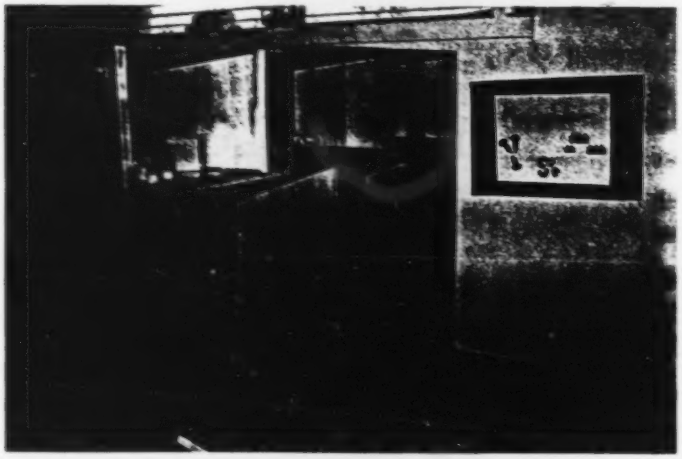
Softness, or comfort, is an essential component of the infant-toddler environment. Although toddlers will learn, for example, while seated at tables, they are more comfortable in themselves when they are able to climb in and over structures, sit on a lap, or curl up in a cushion. As Greenman (1988) has pointed out 'a soft, responsive, physical environment reaches out to children. It helps children to feel more secure, enabling them to venture out and explore the world. Most importantly, it allows children to make their presence felt, to leave an imprint on the world.' (p.74).

Challenge: Stepping forward to autonomy

Elizabeth Dimond (1979) has suggested that the most accurate description of the infant and toddlers' development is that of 'two steps forward, one step back'. She argues that within a consistent, predictable, yet challenging environment, children will be able to move forward towards 'increasing diversity, change and non-predictability, and then back again' (p.7). This 'interplay of regression and growth', she states, is vital to the child's development of autonomy and independence (p.8).

The environment must provide the opportunity for children to seek their own challenges.

The child care environment for the under-threes must recognise their 'two steps forward,



Putting away toys is a major part of the child care day. This can be helped by storing equipment in clearly labelled containers which identify where items are to be packed away.

one step back' mode of learning, and provide the opportunity for children to seek out their own challenges. The challenging environment is one which is flexible and responsive to individual needs to push forward and retreat. Cognitively, the child needs novelty, change, stimulating and interesting items to explore, look at, and manipulate. They need items which respond to them, which help teach about cause and effect, and develop a child's understanding of themselves and their world. Physically, the child needs the opportunity for mastery and extension of physical skills. Equipment such as climbers, tunnels, pits, slopes, stairs, surfaces at varying levels, push-pull toys, blocks to carry and dump, all provide appropriate challenges for the rapidly growing child.

The purpose of a stimulating, challenging environment for under-threes is to encourage independence and freedom of choice.

A challenging environment must encourage independence, autonomy and freedom of choice. Staff must, however, recognise appropriate and reasonable levels of choice. A range of activities or equipment that is too limited will result in boredom and frustration. Too great a choice, on the other hand, can offer too many distractions and result in little concentrated effort, with children rushing from one area to the next. In setting up the child care environment, staff should be aim to provide an interesting selection of items, which meet the wide range of children's developing skills, and which are accessible, arranged logically and changed regularly. As Jim Greenman (1988) has stated, 'the play environment should be developed as a wonderful, interesting place that continually captures a child's attention and is laid out to ensure individual and group experiences' (p.54).

Conflict over toys is not a suitable challenge for the under-threes.

In planning for successful group experiences in the under-threes' area, staff need to consider the egocentric nature of this age group. A major task for infants and toddlers is to develop socially acceptable ways of interacting with others and the child care environment should help them in this task. Setting up small play spaces, such as book corners, soft toy areas, and cubbies, can encourage positive interaction between groups of two or three children. Disputes over favourite toys can be avoided by providing duplicates or triplicates of items.

In summary, within a consistent, familiar, almost rigid framework, there is the opportunity for novelty, stimulation and challenge. The structure of the environment is unchanging, but the activities, props, songs, stories and materials vary, and provide a breadth of learning experiences.

Effective organisation of equipment and space

June Wangmann (1995) has pointed out that there has been a 'reluctance to acknowledge the importance of child care settings as a work environment for staff' (p.8). This is unfortunate, because it is clearly the staff who are the key contributors to a quality program for children. It is vital that the adults who work in child care 'have some sense of autonomy in relation to the environment' (Greenman 1988, p.90). Adults need to feel they are doing their job well, and their job, as argued in this resource book, is about being with children. The satisfaction of working in day care comes from having a positive involvement in young children's development, and participating in their emergence into

fascinating, skilful, lively, competent, and unique personalities. It doesn't come from moving tables, chairs and beds, being effective packers and stackers, or untiring rearrangers of furniture and equipment.

Margaret Clyde (1988) has suggested that changes to the physical environment can alleviate some of the pressures on child care staff. Similarly, Greenman has written that the child care environment can be 'furnished, equipped and organised to maximise the caregiver's time and ease of providing care' (Greenman 1988, p.54). A centre with a visible and logical order will also enable substitute carers or parents to fit in smoothly with the functioning of the room. The question to consider is:

How can the child care environment be organised so that staff are able to spend a maximum of quality time with the children?

In attempting to answer this question, we must accept the reality of financial pressures on centres and the need to work to an efficient budget. Many centres operate with the number of staff required by State licensing agencies, which may be one carer to five infants, or one-to-eight for children over two. The question becomes, how do we make maximum use of minimum staff?

Any discussion of staffing with under-threes must begin with the proviso that adequate numbers of staff are present at all times. The author recognises that readers' views about what is 'minimum' staff will differ, according to State staffing requirements and/or personal experience. Some views may be in accord with the guidelines published by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), which state that 'the ratio of staff to children will vary depending on the age of the children, the type of program activity, the inclusion of children with special needs, the time of the day, and other factors. Staffing patterns should provide for adult supervision of children at all times and the availability of an additional adult to assume responsibility if one adult takes a break' (1987, p.24). NAEYC recommends a ratio of 1:3 or 1:4 for babies and 1:3, four or five for toddlers. Whilst not wishing to enter the argument on what adult:child ratio should be provided in the infant-toddler area(s), it is probably fair to say that the number of adults is often lower that staff would prefer.

In aiming for the provision of quality care, and quality time for staff interaction with children, it is essential that staff resources are used as effectively and efficiently as possible. The following points are offered for consideration by staff, either as questions about current practices or as suggestions for improvement.

Rostering of staff

An effective roster system is one which recognises the needs of staff, children and parents. Essentially it requires centres to take account of the more demanding parts of the day and ensure that staff:child ratios are high during these times. For example, arrival and departure times, although not noted for high numbers of children, require staff to be free to discuss with parents the child's program for the day and share day-to-day happenings. These are also times of transition when children need extra physical and emotional support from staff. Although actual numbers may be low, these are the times when staff: child ratios should be high. Staff at each centre should ascertain when they need high adult:child ratios, and when a lower number of staff will suffice, in the setting up of effective and responsive roster systems.

Discipline and supervision time

Alice Honig has stated that 'discipline for toddlers may mean arranging the environment so that no-nos are infrequent' (Honig 1988). A well-organised environment, which is responsive to toddlers' needs and allows children to choose from a range of interesting and suitable activities, can help take some of the worries out of supervision. Staff should identify troubling areas, or pieces of equipment, and find solutions. For example, the outdoor climbing structure at the Harvard Medical Area Infant-Toddler Centre in Boston was designed to have removable gates at a number of its entry and exit points, so that children could safely use it even under minimal supervision. By reducing their role as trouble-shooters, caregivers will have more time for positive interaction with children, for language development, for extension of play and for peaceful, intimate routine care episodes.

Groups within groups

Large numbers of children are not easy to manage and, as many authors would suggest, educationally unsound, especially for the under-threes. Many child care settings, however, require that 20 or more infants and toddlers are cared for in one room. Rather than have all staff attempt to supervise and interact with all children, centres can find ways for staff to work with smaller groups.

The use of a primary caregiver scheme, for example, in which children are encouraged to relate specifically to one or two particular staff members, gives staff a more realistic number of children to get to know. Another solution is to organise the day's schedule so that children are together in small groups. In this case, sleep patterns or eating habits, age or developmental stage, activity level or ability, are used to group children with a caregiver for certain times during the day. These times can be for special indoor or outdoor play activities, planned learning experiences, early sleep time, quiet time after waking, helping with meal preparation or clearing away, storytime, etc. Groups can use different areas of the room, or separate for indoor and outdoor playtime.

Make the most of routines

Time spent by staff in non-caring activities, such as moving furniture, serving meals, carrying cots or mattresses, setting up beds, clearing up, etc., takes away from the contact time that caregivers have with children. There are two possible answers to this:

1. Do less of it, by setting up the equipment in such a way as to minimise the need for daily rearrangement. The final section of this resource book offer some ideas for ways to organise the environment so that there is less

Staff should be free to work with small groups of children at regular times during the day
(Maitland Child Care Centre)

time spent carrying furniture. The most important factor is to arrange for storage of routine care equipment to be as close as possible to the area it will be used.

2. Involve the children, or some of them, in the activity. Involving children in routine tasks may mean that these jobs take longer, but the positive benefits for staff and children should outweigh the losses in efficiency.

Consider time spent waiting

Children in child care centres often spend a lot of time waiting. They are asked to wait, for example, to be fed, to go to sleep, to get up after sleep, to get dressed, to use the bathroom, to go outside, even to play. These waiting times, especially for infants and toddlers, cause restlessness and unnecessary discipline problems. Very young children should not have to wait for long periods of time; developmentally, they are not ready for this, and practically, such times can be stressful and cause problems for an already over-stretched staff. It is far better to arrange the day's schedule on the basis of meeting individual needs when they arise, rather than try to force 15 to 20 youngsters to fit into a rigid routine.

Equipment and storage needs

Equipment for child care centres needs to be considered from two points — children's use of equipment, and accessibility of storage facilities.

First, there needs to be provision for the particular needs of infants and toddlers. Briefly, this means having items which meet toddlers' immediate need for physical activity — for climbing, crawling, and moving in a range of ways and through a number of directions. An indoor climbing structure will prevent the problem of children climbing on the tables or the bookcases (which they will surely do!). Centres also need to ensure that there is enough equipment available so as to prevent disputes over favoured items. Positive use of equipment by toddlers can also be encouraged when carers interact with children during their play.

The second point about equipment concerns storage, and the ease of access that staff have to equipment. Centres need to find ways to reduce the amount of to-ing and fro-ing that staff are required to do when changing activities or setting up furniture for routine care. By ensuring that equipment is close at hand materials can be provided and packed away easily with a minimum of carrying. Some examples of easy access include having toys packed on open shelves at adult level above the part of the room where it is most likely to be used; storing toys in cupboard units which can be easily closed or opened as required; shelf units on castors can be turned to face the wall when not in use; large strong hooks in the walls, at adult height, can safely hold larger pieces of equipment.

Putting it all together:

Creating workable places which meet the needs of infants and toddlers

In setting up a child care environment which recognises and meets the unique characteristics and needs of infants and toddlers, staff should aim to include a number of essential learning areas. Where possible, these learning areas should be distinct, separate, and permanently positioned in the room.

1. Active Physical Play Area
   - meets the young child's need for mobility, in all directions
   - can give children a new perspective, such as being above the world, observing others, looking up, looking down
   - requires children to take turns or to wait briefly
   - allows children to interact with exuberance and energy
2. Manipulative play area
   - enables children to find out how things work, to produce effects, to solve problems
   - develops fine motor and construction skills
   - can allow children to make independent choices in selecting toys
   - can help children to take responsibility for restoring order, through learning where items are stored and replacing them after use
3. Messy play/Creative corner
   - recognises the child's sensory mode of learning about the world
   - enables children to explore and experiment with water, paint, paste
   - allows for social interaction and cooperation
   - helps children to develop respect for the rights of others
4. Kitchen/Dramatic play area
   - encourages the development of a child's sense of self-identity
   - enables children to take on social roles, to respond to and enact their home experiences
   - allows children to learn social skills and practice conversational language with peers and with adults
5. Quiet play/Music and story corner
   - recognises the child's need to relax during the child care day and to be cosy with an adult as they would be in their own home
   - provides an essential 'softness' and comfort in the centre
   - encourages children's interest in books, pictures, songs, music
   - allows staff time to assess and develop the child's emerging understandings and skills with language
6. Personal storage
   - recognises the child's need to belong, to be seen as an individual
   - provides a link between the centre and the home
   - encourages the development of independence and self-sufficiency
7. Curiosity/Sensory corner
   - recognises the child's need to discover, explore, touch, examine, listen to and experience a wide range of materials, plants and animals

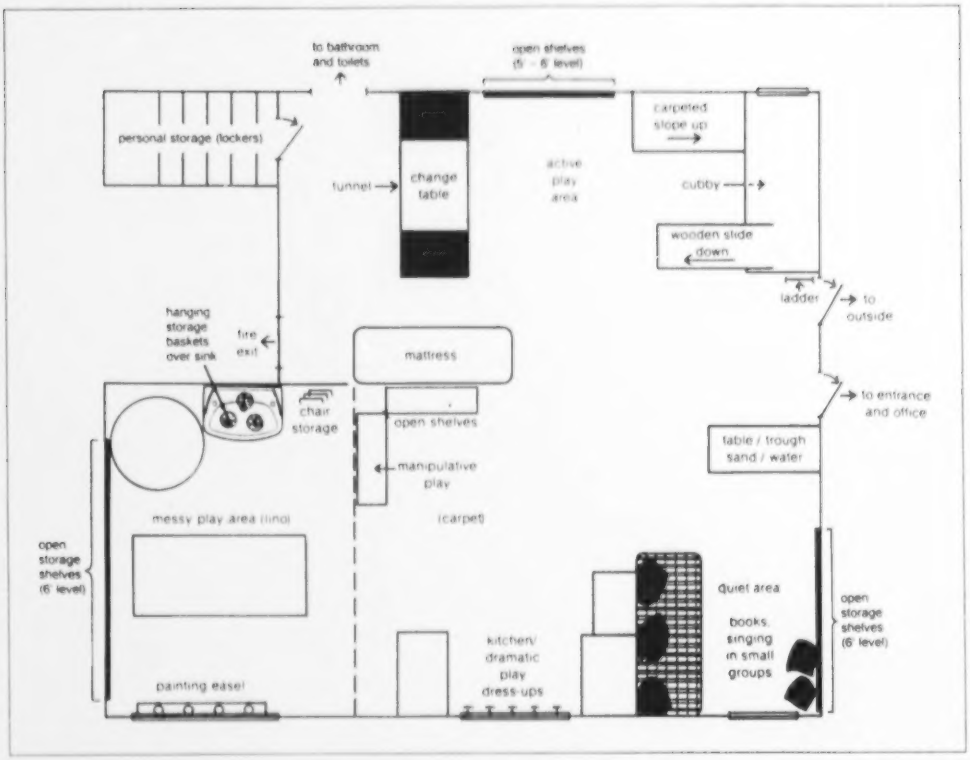
8. Outside world/Real life experiences
   - recognises the special need of the child care child to be part of the everyday world of cleaning, shopping, working, cooking, etc., through visits, excursions and real experiences as well as through books, pictures and imaginary play
9. Seclusion area
   - recognises the child's need for privacy, a place to retreat to, a place to be alone or to escape the busy-ness and routine of the centre
   - provides a place for very small groups to play together
10. Eating area
    - allows children to socialise and interact with adults and children in daily routines
    - develops self-help skills and independence
11. Nappy change area/Toileting
    - can allow a special one-to-one time for infants and their caregivers, recognising the need for personal attention and affection
    - gives the child time to relax and enjoy personal contact, or to look at pictures, mobiles, etc., and be talked to by an adult
12. Sleep area
    - recognises the child's need for a familiar sleep space by providing personal items for comfort and security
    - can accommodate individual sleep patterns and habits
    - should allow early and late sleepers to be placed appropriately
    - can include the planning of quiet activity for early risers
13. Dressing and undressing area
    - recognises the toddler's need to become autonomous and to develop independence in self-help tasks
    - allows staff time to give personal and individual attention.

In designing and equipping such learning areas, staff should note that the materials and activities provided in each of these areas will be dependant on the ages and developmental needs of the individual children attending the centre. With non-mobile infants, for example, Cataldo (1983) recommends a selection of rattles and other noise makers in the sensory corner. In the area for physical play, equipment should be arranged to allow for reaching, kicking and grasping, and should include such items as mobiles, bells, toys and interesting washable materials suspended on string or elastic.

The following diagrams illustrate how staff working in an Infant-Toddler Centre operated by the Harvard University Medical Area, in Boston, have provided an educationally appropriate program for a group of 15 toddlers. The room includes most of the areas mentioned above, and is set up to minimise the amount of furniture rearrangement during the day.

Plan A shows the usual room arrangement for play time.

Chairs are stacked to maximise floor space and reduce noise. Hanging baskets over the sink provide storage for painting materials and easy clean-up of painting or pasting activities. High shelves are used to store equipment, and allow easy selection of items by staff. The water/sand trough is covered, and doubles as a table, when not being used in the messy play area. Pictures and photographs of the children are stuck on the walls at child's eye level, and are covered with contact to prevent tearing. Open shelves allow children to select from a restricted, yet planned, range of items. A large climbing structure allows children free access to climbing, sliding, and crawling. The cubby underneath is secluded and



Plan A: Room set up for indoor play

private. Of major import is the conscious effort by staff to use all floor space for play, and staff-child interaction. Everything at child level is for children. Storage is out of their reach and out of view.

Plan B illustrates how the room is adapted for different types of routines, eating, sleeping, dressing and undressing.

The toy cupboard is closed, and the top becomes a surface for storing and serving children's meals. The cupboard is also closed when play time is over and children are being put down to sleep. Mats are arranged around the room according to children's sleep needs. Staff sit next to three or four children where they are able to rub backs or read quietly to help them go off to sleep. Children wake and get up when they are ready, moving to the quiet corner for stories or other activities.

Indoor climbing structures meet toddlers' immediate need for challenging physical activity. *(Harvard Medical Area Child Care)*

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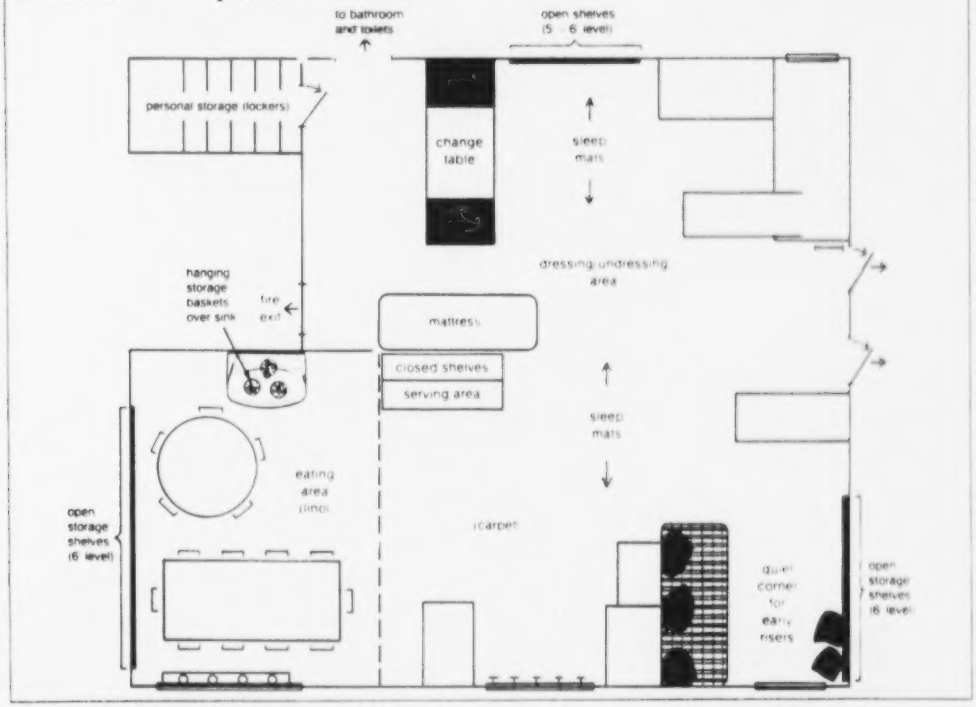
Plan B: Room set up for routine care



A Final Plea: Environments which work for carers as well as children

In the six years that have elapsed since the first edition of this resource book was written, there has been a tremendous increase in our awareness of the essential role that carers play in the provision of quality care for infants and toddlers. Many factors have contributed to this: the heightened sense of professionalism in the early childhood field, the effectiveness of self-assessment and self-improvement through the accreditation system, and the growing acceptance in society of the contribution that carers make to the well-being of the next generation. To conclude, however, I would like to come back to where this resource book began, with the personal approach. Where Lilian Katz asked 'Would you place your child in this centre?', I ask, 'Would you like to work in this centre?' How can we ensure that child care centres for infants and toddlers are places where staff enjoy their work?

A number of answers to this question have appeared in the preceding sections. The statement, for example, that adults who work in child care must 'have some sense of autonomy in relation to the environment' (Greenman 1988, p.90), and the suggestion that changes to the physical environment can alleviate some of the pressures on child care staff (Clyde 1988). The implication here is that staff should not be at the beck and call of the timetable or the furniture, but that creative organisation of space and storage can enable carers to spend more time with the

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children. For example, keeping items within easy reach, available when and where they are needed, makes for a more efficient and easier work environment. Each centre needs to look closely at their own organisation, to identify problems. Giving staff the opportunity to discuss these problems and come up with divergent and creative solutions can also lead to increased enthusiasm and confidence (Paula Jorde-Bloom 1988).

Another answer to the question of how to provide environments which work for adults is the argument for comfortable adult furniture in infant and toddler playrooms. While it is now commonplace to see easy chairs and lounge furniture in staffrooms and parent areas, these are still a rarity in the children's play area. Caring for babies and toddlers is a physically demanding task, and staff should be able to relax throughout the workday, not just during their breaktimes. The demands of caring for and interacting with infants and toddlers requires a lot of lifting and carrying, which can lead to muscle strain in the lower back and arms. There are ways to alleviate this: the use of slings helps spread the weight to upper back and frees up arm movement; some centres have constructed stairs next to the change table so that mobile toddlers can walk up for a nappy change rather than being lifted; and low, solid furniture allows staff to sit down to pick up or nurse a child rather than bending from a standing position.

A useful first step is for staff to assess their own work situation. This can be done through individual lists of problem areas and concerns, or through the use of a published checklist. The Infant-Toddler Environment Rating Scale (Harms et al., 1986) includes a number of items related to provisions for staff, and Paula Jorde-Bloom's (1988) Early Childhood Work Environment Survey has a section of questions about the physical environment. These are good starting points for making improvements to the work environment.

Environments need to work for staff as well as children

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